TESSAKU

ISSUE TWO

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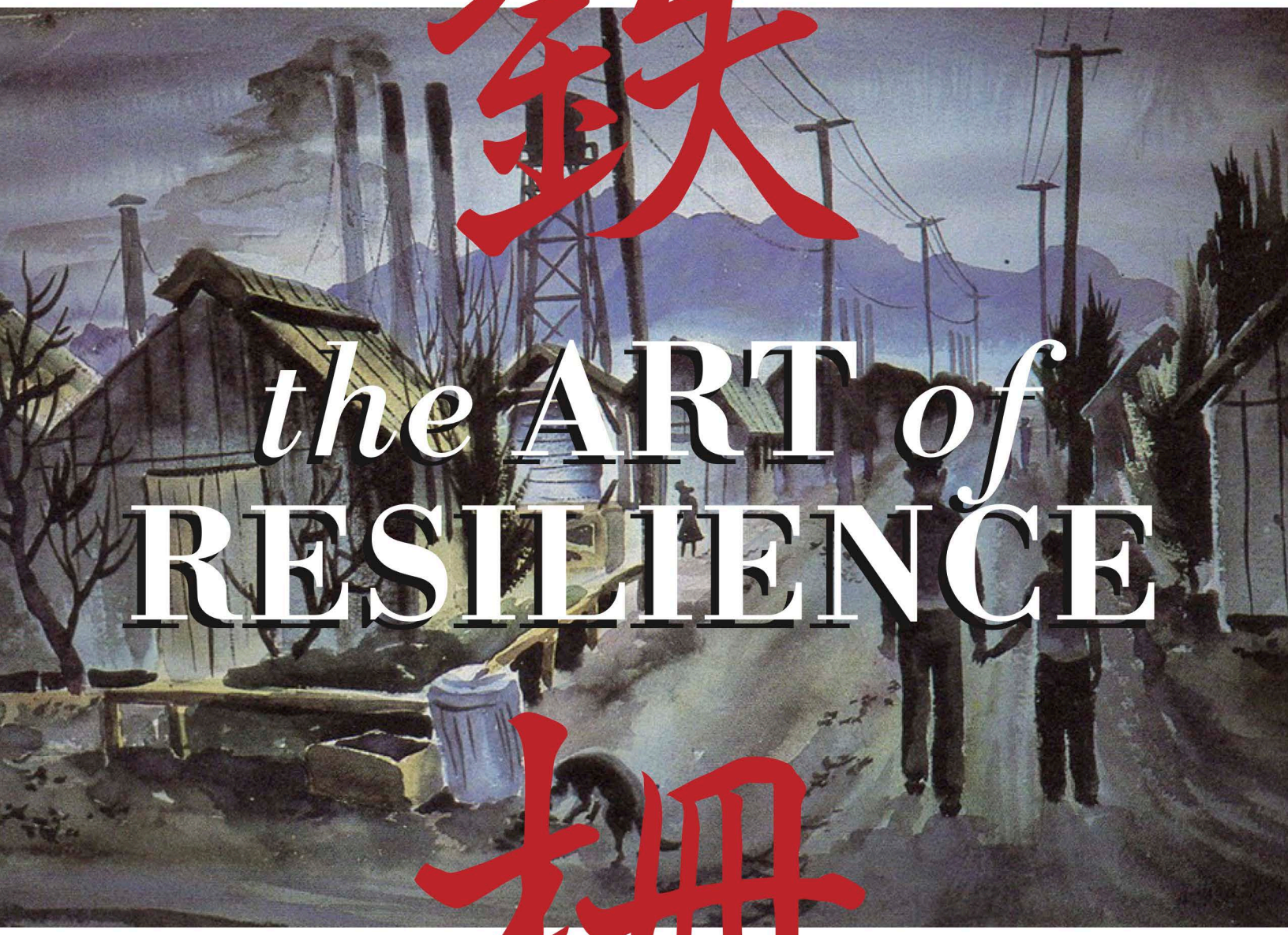

the ART *of* RESILIENCE

STORIES OF THE JAPANESE AMERICAN INCARCERATION

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DEDICATION AND CREDITS

THE ART OF RESILIENCE

My grandfather wasn't an artist in the traditional sense. Aside from his passion for cultivating bonsai plants (now certainly a rare artform), he left no paintings, poetry, or sketches behind for us to frame and admire. What my grandfather did though, was write. He was always writing letters, pouring over books, and writing a memoir at the time his health declined. The unfortunate thing however, is that what he wrote, how often, and how much remains hearsay through my father. My family has none of his writings, all of which would have certainly been in Japanese. What we have, ironically, are snippets of responses he gave to questionnaires and paperwork wrangled by the WRA [War Relocation Authority]: the Statement of United States Citizen of Japanese Ancestry, colloquially known as the Loyalty Questionnaire; a transcript from his citizenship renunciation interview; and an unpublished op-ed for the *Topaz Times*. His responses within these forced and arbitrary situations are all that remain of his internal struggle to find a way home, to secure his family's sense of place.

But what his responses also reveal is defiance. We know, and what my dad can attest to through the eyes of a son, is that my grandfather didn't make his captivity easy for anyone - for better, and for worse.

Yet to me, this is resilience. To leave a mark, to leave something behind, even if you were marked as difficult and "incorrigible." Knowing that a record exists, that your perspective was noted, that you were simply there, is an act of resilience.

In each camp that held prisoner first generation Japanese migrants and American citizens alike, the reliance on painting, poetry, music, dancing, carving, stone work, and landscaping was key to defining unlawful imprisonment on their own terms. All of these creative outlets became a means to survival. Making due with "only what they could carry," the family heirlooms they created and left behind often provide more truthful insight than the occasional photograph. Though the government-commissioned photographs taken by Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams certainly give us something beautiful and tangible, at the end of the day, Lange and Adams were free people. But the paintings, poetry collections, and bird pins made on the other side of the fence are imbued with the spirit of the community.

To leave a mark, to leave something behind, to know that through records - visual or written - your perspective remains. To prove that you were simply there, is an act of resilience.

MY GRANDFATHER TAMOTSU TENDS TO HIS BONSAI PLANTS

In this second issue of Tessaku, you'll read an intimate conversation with Masao Tom Inada, a Military Intelligence Service veteran whose talent for sketching landed him a job at an animation studio in New York City, shortly before the draft plucked him from his new life. Worlds away in Arizona, a young Harry Yoshizumi tolerated life in the Poston barracks by painting hundreds of watercolor landscapes, even helping to create a mural for the camp's library. In the same camp, 35-year-old Akira Togawa raised his children and wrote haunting poetry to document the minutiae of camp life, lamenting the breakdown of relations between the country of his birth and the country of his family. In California below the snow-capped Sierra Nevadas, a teenage Mary (Kageyama) Nomura became known as the Songbird of Manzanar, performing at camp events and dances which would lead her to the love of her life, Shi Nomura. And today in New York, Yonsei Sam Hamashima has returned to a forgotten family tradition of theater, using his calling as a playwright to link him to his ancestral roots.

I would be remiss to not acknowledge that the majority of the works featured in this issue are by men, resulting in a slight imbalance in terms of gender representation. It goes without saying that there were many women artists, writers, and painters throughout every camp whose work prevails. But for now, I am pulling from the direct resources I have and the collection of interviews I've personally completed. (However, it is mainly the women relatives and descendants who are the keepers of these works by their grandfathers and uncles today). Similarly, not every camp is evenly represented in this issue, but that inclusion will be part of the ongoing work of this Tessaku series. For each piece included here, I am beyond grateful to each family member who allowed these stories to be published and shared.

I often wonder what I would have been able to contribute to this or another collection had my grandfather's memoir or reflections been saved. I think about being able to read his words in Japanese, as he would have intended. I wonder what nuances and layered meanings would get lost in translations from his fluent vernacular to mine, feeling like any level of communication between us would have been impossible.

But what my grandfather left me with were his principles and unwavering conviction for what was right, and what was wrong.

Those are the things that need no translation. That was his resilience.

An Interview with

MASAO TOM INADA

"I've always just got to think to myself, I don't know what it is but everything happens to me by chance or coincidence. And I get spared."

MASAO (TOM) INADA

Masao Inada, who often goes by Tom these days, believes that someone's been looking out for him. Despite the situations in which he nearly found himself – jobless, a replacement for one of the military units with the highest casualty rates in WWII, or barely getting to meet the woman who would become his wife – Tom seemed to luck out. And you can't help but feel like he's most deserving of his good fortune. He's one of the nicest people you'll ever meet.

Born and raised in Sacramento, California, Tom has pursued art in some form or another his entire life. Before the war broke out, he intended to go to art college after teachers told him to cultivate his knack for drawing. But Tom's aspirations were put on hold once Executive Order 9066 was signed, and his family was forced to leave their home for Tule Lake. There, he worked for the camp's newspaper, *Tulean Dispatch*, in the art department. (Coincidentally, he would later do the same job for the U.S. Army's newspaper *Stars and Stripes*).

Though he kept his head down and was often working or drawing, Tom and his family were not immune to the heightened tensions and familial divisions that surfaced as a result of the "Loyalty Questionnaire" conducted by the government, which asked people to rescind any presumed loyalty to the Emperor of Japan and determined people's willingness to serve in the U.S. Army. Tom's father answered "no" to both questions, and wanted Tom to do the same. "I said, 'I don't know anything about Japan and all I know is the United States,'" he remembers. "So yes I'll be loyal to the United States, despite what they did." He recalled this as his first real argument with his father, who accepted his decision but made him promise not to volunteer. But as fate would have it, Tom was drafted into the Military Intelligence Service, derailing his plans in New York but serendipitously bringing him to his future wife on a day off in Chicago. After settling back in California, Tom built a career as the sole graphic artist for an Oakland-based paperbox company, preparing advertising samples and "setup boxes."

Now 98 and living in the East Bay of California, Tom's crystal clear memory and impeccable physical condition betray his age. He's an avid bowler, golfer, traveler, and continues to do art with his grandchildren.

Can you paint me a picture of what your life was like before the war?

I was born and raised in Sacramento, California. I graduated from Sacramento Junior College and when I was going there I was taking an art course. Actually, when the war happened and we were told to evacuate, my father had to get rid of all of his equipment for a dirt cheap price.

I think he had some police connection and he [the cop] offered to keep an eye on our home, and some of the stuff that he couldn't sell, he stored. He said that he would watch it for us. And I guess he rented the downstairs or something. I actually don't know what happened because I didn't get back to Sacramento after the evacuation. I got out of camp and landed in New York and found a job there.

My oldest sister [Betty] was raised by my grandparents in Japan and she came back to California when she was about high school age. And she was interested in singing popular songs and all that. So at about age 17, she went to Los Angeles to try and get a recording at Columbia or something. She never did get a recording thing but did start a singing career in Japan. She would sing popular American songs and translate it into a Japanese and English version. Since my sister was raised in Japan she was quite fluent.

Why was she in Japan originally?

I guess my father came to the U.S. when he was only 17, and worked around and was finally able to start a fish market, and I think he got married from a picture bride. My mother was from the same area in Japan. I guess because they weren't really established, the oldest one was kept in Japan, raised by the grandparents.

TOM AND HIS SISTER BETTY INADA

TOM'S DRAWING OF A BARN AT TULE LAKE

So you were taking art classes in Sacramento. Is that what you wanted to do as a career?

Right. When I graduated from Sacramento Junior College my teacher told me that I should continue going to L.A. where they have an art center which was more advanced — then the war came. So all the time I felt I wasn't really accomplished as a graphic artist. So when I went to show my portfolio they would say, "Oh it's not quite clear enough," and stuff like that.

Did you end up in Tule Lake from the beginning?

Yes right after the assembly center, we were sent by train to Tule Lake.

And you answered yes/yes on that loyalty questionnaire?

Right.

Did your whole family answer the same way?

No [*laughs*]. My family, I don't know if they went through that but I know I went through that questionnaire business because I was male, and those two questions, "Were you loyal to Japan or to the U.S." and "Would you be willing to fight for the U.S.?"

My father was really influenced by the parents. And the block manager had a son two years older than me and he had told his son to say no/no. And so my father naturally wanted me to say no/no. I told him I answered yes/yes and he said, "Why'd you do that?" We had an argument and I said I don't know anything about Japan and all I know is the United States, and so yes, I'll be loyal to the United States, despite what they did. That was really my first argument with my dad.

TOM'S FATHER, YOSHIMATSU INADA

Was he upset with you for a while after that?

No I don't think so, but he made me promise that I would not volunteer. But if I was drafted, I would go. So when I got to Tule Lake I started to work for the *Tulean Dispatch* newspaper. I was one of three people in the art department. Everything was done on mimeograph. We would have to cut the headlines, type up fonts for the style of lettering and we would have to trace on the mimeograph.

And that was all run by the Japanese Americans?

Yes, they had an all-Japanese section and English section on the paper. There was an editor for both. So as far as activities in Tule Lake camp, I didn't know too much about it because I would go to work at the newspaper and come back. They had a recreation department and they had baseball and basketball teams. But I didn't know anything about that [*laughs*].

You were just focused on doing art.

On doing my job and coming home. Other than that in the evening, maybe I would've gone to one or two dances.

How did you get out of camp? You mentioned you went to New York?

Quite a few people that worked for the *Dispatch* said they wanted to get out, so a group of us signed up to get out. And my friends were all able to get out. And fortunately, I heard about Quakers. The Quakers offered a hostel for people to live in while they looked for a job. I went to Cincinnati, and I stayed at the Quaker hostel. And while you were there you did housework, and they gave you board and room, no charge. Like I say, when I went to show my portfolio in Cincinnati, they'd say no, you're not quite finished [with art school] so I couldn't find anything.

And there was a fellow from Sacramento also at the hostel and he had a sister in New York, married to a Japanese national. And they were never evacuated or anything, so he said he was going to go to New York and asked me if I wanted to go. So we shared a bunk in New York. I was looking for a job there.

I always think someone must be looking out for me because I was walking down New York, trying to find a job and this reporter that worked in the *Dispatch* was coming from the opposite direction and he recognized me and he called, "Hey Mas! You looking for a job?" So he told me to call such-and-such at an animation studio that just moved to New York. Well, I didn't know anything about animating. So I started from the bottom, which is called "in-betweening."

In-betweening?

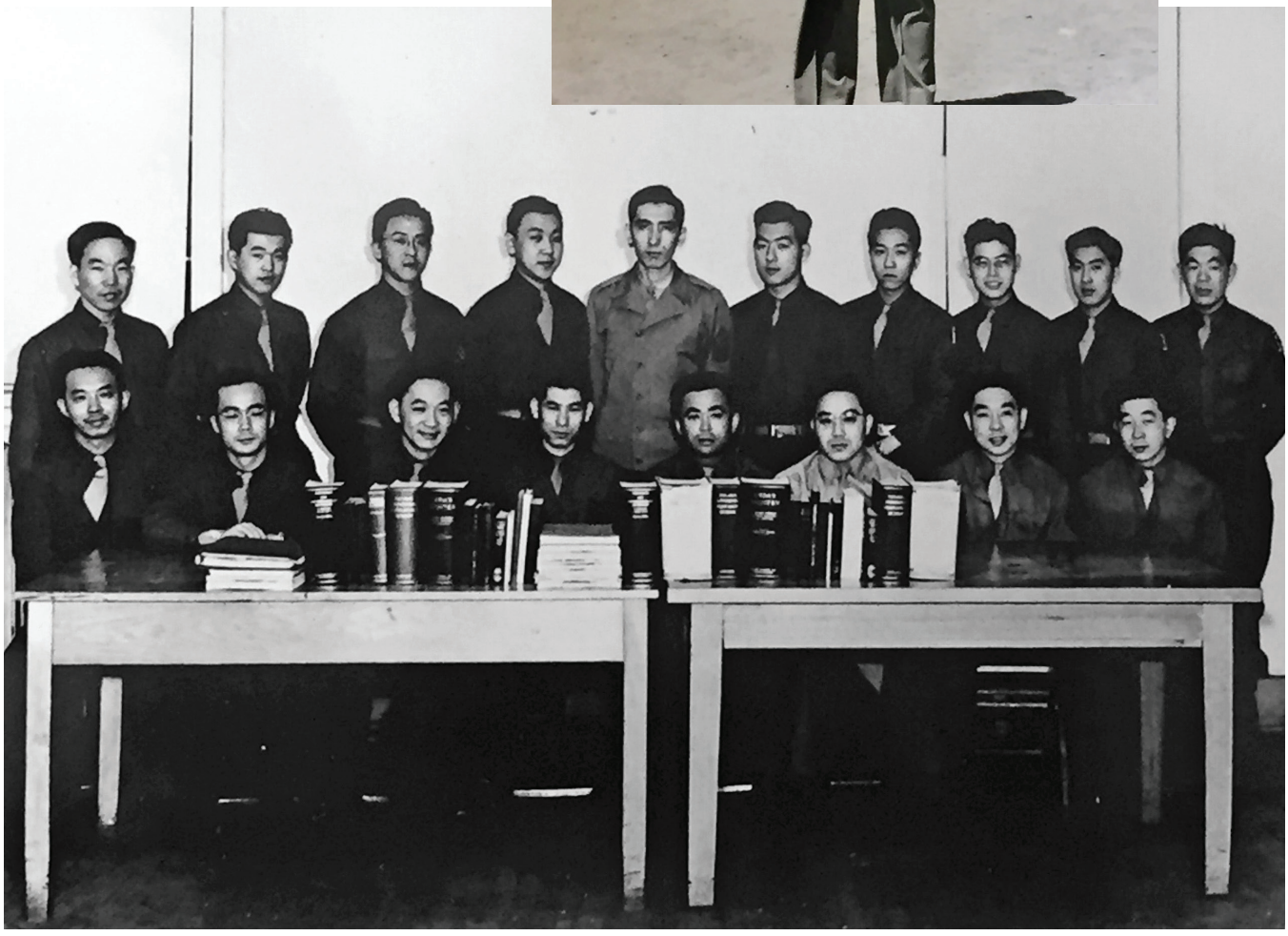
Everything in the animated cartoon was on two pegs and they lit the glass top with a light underneath and they had papers that fit on two pegs. And cellophane underneath. And in-betweening is where they had an animator do the sketch for the story, and maybe the character was raising its arm. So the animator would draw the action to make the action smooth in-between the two.

Drawings between the two hands at every level?

Right. That was the lowest paying job there. And that studio made the Little Lulu character and Popeye the Sailor.

What was the name of the studio?

Famous Studios. And because I had some art training they said, "Well maybe you could do the rendering for the background scene." And that was twice the amount of salary that I got [*laughs*]. That's when I ended up doing the rendering of the backgrounds, worked for about two or three months. And then I got my draft notice.



TOM'S MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE CLASS. TOM IS IN THE BACK ROW, SECOND FROM RIGHT

So you were living in New York, with a great job, and then you got a draft notice in the mail. Do you remember what it said?

Well it said you're drafted and you're supposed to go to New Jersey or something for your physical and all that. They ask you questions about your background. They asked me, did you go to Japanese language school in Sacramento? I said yeah I did. I think I went up to about the 6th grade in Japanese. This was all on the record.

So then I was sent to Mississippi for basic training. After we finished basic training we were lined up to embark for replacement for the 442nd. And then, so many names were called out and I was one of them. They told us we were going to Fort Snelling, Minnesota for Military Intelligence. Well, like I say, because I was trained in Japanese school they sent me there. And then I heard from people in basic training that two of my friends, on the landing in Europe, got killed or hurt.

When you were drafted, what was your feeling? Even though you said 'yes' you would serve, were you upset that you were leaving your art career?

Well, you know, shikata ga nai [it can't be helped]. So that's what it is, and you can't fight it. But naturally I resented the fact that I just got a raise and all that, and get drafted. But just like anything else, you accept it and try to make the best of it. Well, one thing came out of it. When I was in Fort Snelling, I had my three day pass. The only people I knew in Chicago was someone named Martha, who took the same art class. So I contacted her and asked if I could see her.

It's funny that I had a date with Martha and she told me how to get to her place and all that. And when I got there Martha comes out and says, "I'm sorry, I got the mumps." [*laughs*] So she said, why don't you take out my cousin, Yoshiko? So I said well, okay. So we had a first date and I remember going to one of those soda places. I was always shy about talking to girls and stuff, but when I was talking with her, she was easy to talk to and so I figured, "Man, this is the first one that I, you know, could get along with and talk freely." So, after I got sent overseas, I asked if I could correspond with her. That's what we were doing all the time while I was overseas. And I tell my grandkids, I must've been a pretty good letter writer because we more or less got engaged through correspondence.

TOM IN HIS MILITARY INTELLIGENCE SERVICE UNIFORM

TOM AND YOSHIKO IN CHICAGO

That's a happy ending. You were just comfortable.

Yeah, I guess. I don't think she was shy with me because I know she dated other servicemen while she was in Chicago. She told me.

So after you left, you were sent to the Philippines?

Yeah. When we were in the Philippines, maybe about two or three weeks later, the war with Japan ended. So the very next day myself and another desk sergeant who I knew, both of us were flown to Tokyo to Major Willoughby's headquarters to translate newspapers.

When I got to Tokyo and was stationed at the Dai-Ichi building, I noticed there was a police station nearby and I knew my sister was quite famous as a singer, and she escaped during the war there, so I went to the station and asked if she could locate Fumiko Betty Inada. And the very next day a guy comes up and says, "Hey, you got a visitor downstairs." And I go down there and there she was with Dick Mine [Japanese singer and jazz musician]. She had been singing with Dick Mine's band all through her career. I guess since she was well-known, they located her right away.

So Betty was okay during the war?

She was safe. She used to say that she got so used to the air raid siren when the planes came over — she liked to bake and stuff — she got to the point where she wouldn't go into the shelter, she'd just draw the curtain down so that no lights would show. And then got the point where she didn't care.

And what was your day-to-day like in Tokyo?

Our first duty was there at Willoughby's headquarters, and then after they had us with the ATIS, Allied Translator Interpreter Section, where all the translators would go and work and translate documents or whatever they had, just to kill time. And then if you got assigned to certain places, you'd go out. The only assignment I got while I was there was to the First Cavalry Division, Hiratsuka, they needed an interpreter, and that's where I went. But before being sent, I was translating medical documents or something like that every day. So I learned all about encephalitis [*laughs*].

And why did the U.S. government want those translated?

I don't know what use those medical things were. Just to keep us occupied, I guess. All these [American] officers, they were looking for Japanese swords as souvenirs - they'd just ride around in the jeep and go to police stations where they kept those swords.

Are you fluent in reading and writing in Japanese?

I could recognize Japanese characters, some of them. But we had a Japanese kanji dictionary which I kept when I got out of the army. I still have it. So you could find a character that you don't know how to read and it gives you the meaning and all that. I referred to that quite often.

So would you say most of you in the MIS were pretty much the same level? In being able to translate?

Most of them at the time that I went to MIS were pretty close [in ability]. But the earlier ones, especially the Kibei, they were the good ones. So you know, when I think about it, I belonged to MIS but didn't see any action or anything like that.

TOM'S KANJI DICTIONARY

Do you feel somewhat lucky though, because of how many casualties there were in the 442nd?

Yeah. That's the reason I've always just gotta think to myself, I don't know what it is but everything happens to me by chance or coincidence. And I get spared.

So you were in Japan for how long?

I wrote Yoshiko that I would take a civil service job for a year to spend time with [my sister] and get to know her. So I took my army discharge and then I worked for the federal government in civil service and got a job with the *Stars and Stripes* army newspaper in the art department. So that was when my year contract with the government was up and I told my officer, he was the editor, the head man. I said, my contract is up so I'll go back to the States. He said, "Oh, you're stupid, you can't find a job like this back home now." I said, "I've got a girl waiting for me. That's the reason why I'm going home" [*laughs*].

A DRAWING FROM TOKYO DATED MAY 22, 1946

A VIEW OF THE GOVERNMENT DIET BUILDING FROM BETTY'S APARTMENT IN TOKYO

And were you in touch with your family?

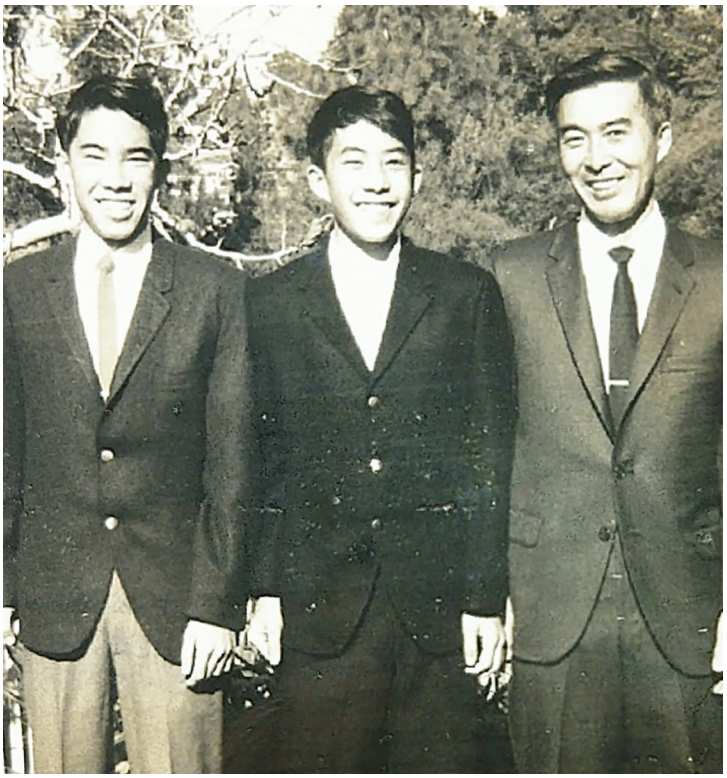
They had gone back to Sacramento. My father wanted to go back to Japan from Tule Lake but the rest of the family said they're not going back. So they moved to Granada, Colorado and in fact, they were already there and when I was going overseas, we were allowed to visit them. My father changed his mind and he was able to go to Granada. Then my youngest sister, father and mother went back to Sacramento. And my father bought into a partnership with a family and started a soda fountain business, or snack shop.

Did you work at the shop?

No, I was still in Japan. So when my contract was over, I came back and I must've stayed about a month or so in Sacramento and then I told my parents I was going to get married in Chicago. So we had a wedding. My father and my sister who was in New York came to the wedding.

You said you got engaged through your letters. Did you know you wanted to ask her from the very beginning?

Yeah, I think so. Because I was pretty faithful.



TOM AND HIS SONS, RICK AND DAVID

How did you end up back in California after Chicago?

My son David was born in Chicago, and when he was about five years old, we decided we'd go back to California. So we drove back in a 1956 Chevrolet, I think. We drove across the country and went by way of Santa Maria. Yoshiko's father had been the minister at the Methodist Church there before the war, so he had been there for 25 years. So Yoshiko, David and myself drove there on the way back, first time I met my father-in-law. I think my wife told me, "My father says you're too quiet" [*laughs*].

And did you have any other children?

I had another son, Rick. And now I have six great-grandchildren. People ask me what is my greatest accomplishment in life, and I say my family.

TOM IN 2016 IN HIS EL CERRITO HOME

BETWEEN TWO WORLDS

The poetry of Akira Togawa

I came to know the work of poet and writer Akira Togawa by way of his granddaughter, Alyson Iwamoto, a ceramicist whose eclectic work reflects her Japanese American heritage and the topography of Southern California where she was born and raised. Though she barely knew Togawa, her maternal grandfather, the creative path she walks today is completely traceable back to him. "I went to Japan and visited my grandfather's ancestral home where seven generations of Togawas were born. On that visit my great-aunt told me that I have my grandfather's heart. I feel we are kindred spirits and he is definitely part of the reason I am an artist," she says.

Born in 1907 near Mt. Fuji, Togawa's world was shaped by the hard work and sacrifices of his parents. In his written reflections, one gets the sense that his mother was a strong and resourceful woman while his father was a dedicated man who did whatever needed to be done for his family. When Togawa was just a baby, his father left to go work in the United States in order to pay off a debt. Togawa wouldn't know his father for nearly 18 years, and after a bout of sickness that left him bedridden during his teenage years, Togawa turned his plight into creativity, becoming "a man who cannot live without a 'poem' and a 'prayer.'"

Though the family assumed his father passed away in America, he did return. And the following year in 1923, 19-year-old Togawa left Japan for California with his father again and made a permanent home in America, building a life in Los Angeles for over 20 years before the war broke out. How tragic it must have been to witness the unraveling of ties between two nations he loved: The one of his parents, and the one of his wife and children. The conflict it stirred in his heart, caught up in a fit of paranoia and bigotry, would deeply influence his work.

AKIRA TOGAWA AND HIS MOTHER, SHIN, IN JAPAN IN 1952. THIS WOULD BE THE LAST TIME HE WOULD SEE HER.

A GROUP PHOTO OF AKIRA TOGAWA'S FAMILY IN FRONT OF THE HOME THEY LIVED IN BEFORE AND AFTER THE WAR ON FICKETT STREET IN BOYLE HEIGHTS. GOOD NEIGHBORS WATCHED THE HOUSE AND RETURNED IT WHEN THEY WERE RELEASED. ALYSON'S MOTHER, JUNE, IS THE SMALLEST GIRL IN FRONT. HER GRANDMOTHER KIMI (MIDDLE) IS HOLDING HER BROTHER, GLENN. ALYSON'S AUNT, AKI MANAKA, IS IN THE BACK AND HER UNCLE PAUL IS NEXT TO HER. HER AUNT MAY KIYOTOKI IS IN FRONT OF HIM.

The poems here come from Togawa's compilation in *Songs of a Honeybee*, originally written in Japanese. Togawa was a meticulous record keeper who wrote every day in his journal, leaving his descendants a rich tapestry of family history and insight into his state of mind. "Whenever I was happy or sad, I wrote a poem. They are not sophisticated but they come from my heart and reflect who I am," he writes. His writing conveys both the mundane and dramatic observations of an immigrant father making the most of a modest living in his adopted homeland.

One gets the sense that he truly loved his new home, but the treatment of Japanese Americans made him critical, perhaps let down by the promises of a "free" and democratic country. Alyson explains that despite living for years in the U.S., her grandfather refused to make the ultimate commitment. "Although my grandfather spent more of his life in the U.S. than in Japan, I know he made a conscious decision not to become a citizen. He didn't want to be a citizen of a country that would imprison anyone, especially its own people."

Distorted Sun

A distorted morning sun is rising
Behind purple mountains
With green woods at its foot
The sky is simply blue
My five-year-old child drew this scene with colored pencils
Every morning she eats breakfast in a cold room
With her little hands holding a cup of cocoa
After breakfast, she joins people at a bonfire outside
Watching the rising sun from the mountains in the east
As imagined by a little child's mind
She expressed it in this simple drawing
My cute-innocent child brings tears to my eyes

We did not know where we were going
We were packed in a train
And had a long long desert journey
Holding her Shirley Temple doll, she cried
"I want to go back home"
"I want to go to Los Angeles"
Even though she lost weight
She lived through this hell of blazing heat
And did not get sick
She went to school every day
And began to enjoy this desert life
It made me very happy

My dear innocent baby girl
I hope you will never have to experience this type of life again
Let us pray together that
The distorted sun you drew will become a big round one
Shining peace on the whole world

A Twilight Scene

A black cat is wagging its tail at the new moon
The evening sky develops under the wings of bats...

Precocious girls wear lipstick
To see boys off at the gate
One boy is going into the army
While another is going to Chicago
Others are going to do seasonal work
At every farewell party, we sing and dance
One after another leaves
We feel sad but
We have to bear with it until the war is over

Smoke from mosquito coils float out from the houses
At a bench outside, people talk about nothing...

Autumn's Edge

With thoughts of war fading
Shrikes are breaking the blue sky announcing
'Autumn!' 'Autumn!'

A sweet, sweet slice of melon
For breakfast this morning

Ears of reeds!
With their silver points like a writing brush
What are they going to paint on the bellflower colored sky?

Cottonseeds silently cracked in the back farm
They say a Japanese movie will be shown soon

A girl was stabbed to death by her lover
A fifty-year-old man killed himself

Riding on an old woman's back
An innocent baby asks her to catch a dragonfly

Chow Mein sometimes tastes good when it is served
More than that, it is precious to have rice every day

They say there is a big sea battle
The crimson red sun is setting beyond the horizon

OCTOBER 1944

A GROUP PHOTO OF BLOCK 45 IN POSTON, ARIZONA. TOGAWA'S WIFE AND DAUGHTER ARE TOGETHER IN THE FRONT ROW, FIFTH FROM RIGHT.

Voices from the Earth

Why is the autumn sky so blue and cold?
Why are the persimmons, which my friend sent me, so red?
Birds are singing perched on persimmon trees
In the backyard
In my old hometown across the ocean
My mother is now alone
'Father has passed away
Toshihisa was killed in the war
Mother is all right
Uncle Taku's house was burned down"
After five years of no communication
The Red Cross gave me the news
I wanted to cry but no tears appeared
Alas...I am a citizen of a defeated nation

In my homeland it must be much more tragic
Maybe endless
I am not the only one that has this indignation
To whom should I complain?
For what should I be sorry?
What should I hate?
In what should I put my whole soul to live?
I press my ear
On this quiet earth
Where even the chirping of insects has stopped
Listening for voices from the earth

3 NOVEMBER 1946

SUBVERSION IN STONE

Engraving Resistance at Manzanar

AN ETCHING ON THE RESERVOIR'S WALL READS "BEAT GREAT BRITAIN AND THE USA," PRESUMABLY WRITTEN BY THE MANZANAR BLACK DRAGON GROUP WHO SIGNED THEIR GROUP NAME NEXT TO THIS.

At the end of a narrow dirt path about a mile away from the iconic stone obelisk that marks Manzanar's cemetery, you'll find a drained concrete basin. It's rare that you'll see another soul exploring the area, as it's so far removed from the once-sprawling camp. Out there, ever so slightly closer to the majestic Sierras, lies what was Manzanar's reservoir, providing all the water needed to sustain more than 10,000 people that lived inside its perimeter.

Here, you'll find unexpected touches of Japanese aesthetic and landscaping. Rock lanterns mark corners of the reservoir, and large stones remain anchored into its walls. But what you'll want to look for in this hallowed place are the words left behind by Issei, Kibei, and Nisei who maintained this life source.

Etched around the perimeter are several messages, declarations even, of resistance. All those that are subversive are written in kanji, while those written in English are simple statements equivalent to "I was here," typically signed with a date. But it is those written in Japanese that retain a sense of urgency, infused with the hope to be read and understood long after their scribe was gone. I suggest visiting the reservoir in solititude because it is in those moments of quiet, with no guide nor group chatter, that a palpable closeness is felt with the people who once worked, met, and confided here, their defiance and disapproval permanently noted. Their presence forever memorialized in stone.

Though there remains some controversy surrounding one of the groups who wrote at least two of these messages and worked on the reservoir as being negatively "pro-Japan" and "ultra-nationalist," I believe it is far too complicated to cast judgement on decisions made at the height of their incarceration. However it is important to note that the Black Dragon Society, a small group of men in Manzanar relative to the larger camp, were known for intimidating the community through sometimes violent means, especially towards those who were helping the American war effort or were veterans themselves. And yet, the WRA administration did virtually nothing to address the community's concerns for their own safety, flippantly responding with, "You are all Japanese and will have to live together.

To access the site, first head to the cemetery, then look for the signs that point you to the reservoir about a mile away. Be prepared for a narrow dirt road if driving, or plan for a long walk out to the site. There is a panel at the far end of the reservoir near the canals that decode the etchings and point out their placement around the walls. I'd recommend leaving yourself about an hour to venture out and explore this uniquely preserved and powerful site.

A VIEW FROM THE RESERVOIR LOOKING WEST TO THE SIERRA NEVADAS. STANDING HERE, MANZANAR WOULD BE BEHIND YOU.

"The simple truth is the camp was no more ready for us when we got there than we were ready for it. We had only the dimmest ideas of what to expect."

JEANNE WAKATSUKI HOUSTON, FAREWELL TO MANZANAR

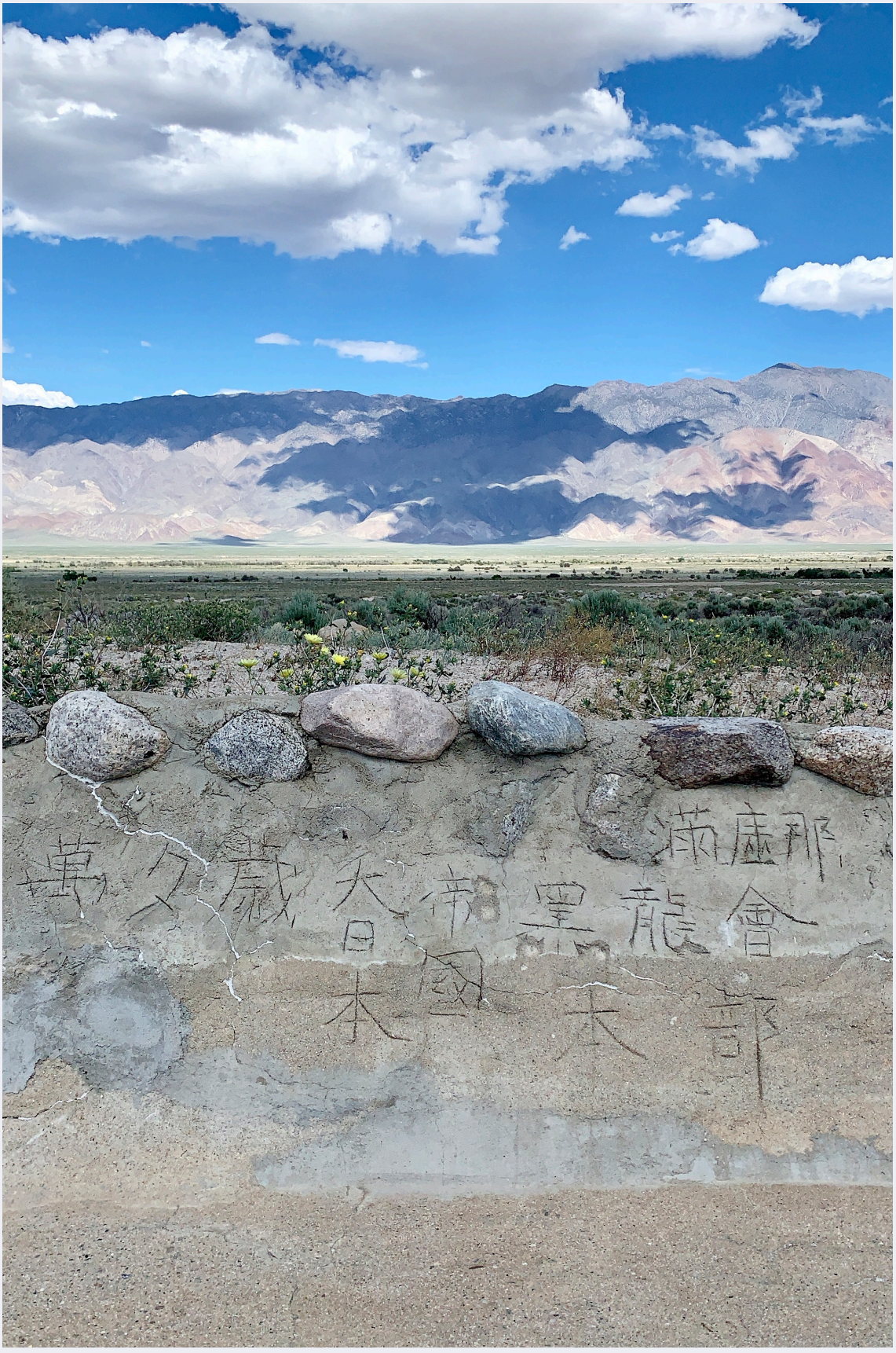
"The indignation, the hatred, the patriotism of the American people shifted into full-throated condemnation of the Japanese who blotted their land. The Japanese who were born Americans and remained Japanese because biology does not know the meaning of patriotism no longer worried about whether they were Japanese Americans or American Japanese. They were Japanese. The radio had said as much."

JOHN OKADA, NO-NO BOY

"STONEWALL BY EMERGENCY CREW. 2/25/43." MANZANAR'S EMERGENCY CREW WERE TASKED WITH SOME OF THE MOST DIFFICULT MANUAL LABOR IN CAMP, ONE OF WHICH WAS BUILDING THE RESERVOIR.

“18TH YEAR.” IN THE SHŌWA ERA OF THE EMPEROR, THIS WOULD BE 1943.

“REPARED MAR 1946”



"BONZAI, THE GREAT JAPANESE EMPIRE, MANZANAR BLACK DRAGON GROUP HEADQUARTERS." MEMBERS OF THE BLACK DRAGON GROUP MADE UP PART OF THE EMERGENCY CREW WHICH BUILT THE RESERVOIR. IN JAPAN, THE BLACK DRAGON SOCIETY (OR KOKURYUKAI) WAS A NATIONALIST GROUP WHOSE PUBLIC-FACING AGENDA WAS TO KEEP RUSSIA FROM ADVANCING INTO ASIA. THEY ALSO FORMED OUTPOSTS IN ETHIOPIA, TURKEY, MOROCCO, SOUTHEAST ASIA, AND THEIR IDEOLOGIES WERE INFLUENCES ON THE BLACK NATIONALIST MOVEMENT AND NATION OF ISLAM LEADERS PRE-WWII.

A DECORATIVE STONE LANTERN

"LOYAL TO THE EMPEROR AND LOVE THE COUNTRY."

THE SONGBIRD OF MANZANAR

"I thought I would not get in the movies because who's going to see a Japanese girl perform in the movies? So if they hear me singing on a record, they won't know it's my Japanese face singing."

Mary Kageyama Nomura was a teenager when the war broke out between the U.S. and Japan. She and her siblings were living completely on their own in Venice, all orphaned when their parents died within four years of each other. This left the unexpected responsibility of providing for the family to her eldest brother, who quit school to work. Though there were difficult times ahead, Mary's mother gave her a great gift before she passed: A love of music, singing, and performing. Mary's mother, Machi, would constantly encourage the children to spend any extra money (if they had it), on seeing shows and exploring music. "She always told my brother and sister, 'If you even have a dime, save it and go see music. Go see plays, and always stick in the arts.' She was an Issei, you know?" Mary says this with a sense of bafflement, surprised that her mother, a first generation migrant from Japan, prioritized the arts even during the Depression.

Later on when the Kageyama family was incarcerated, Mary made the best of their bleak reality in Manzanar, the camp built in California's Owens Valley. It was her musical reputation that gave her the moniker, "Songbird of Manzanar" and would connect her to her future husband, Shi Nomura, who first saw Mary perform in Los Angeles when she was just 14. But they wouldn't meet until their paths crossed in camp years later, seemingly destined to be. Shi fell for Mary instantly, and later looked back at the camp experience with the fondest of memories, remembering it as the place where he met the love of his life.

I want to start off with what a typical day was like for you before the war. What were your parents doing, and what was life like for you?

Well, to tell you the truth, in 1933 is when my mother passed and so I had no mother from eight years old on, and I had no father from when I was four years old on. They both passed and so my brother was the eldest and quit high school and supported us. The Depression was nothing doing for anyone and he as a teenager had to find a job to support his sisters. He had two little sisters and one sister who was just a year and a half younger. And so they both quit high school and he found a job. He watered plants at a nursery as a teenager and brought a few dollars home to support us, and my sister found a job in a produce market washing vegetables and things. You know, they were only 17 and 16 so that was pretty hard.

My mother, when she was thriving, she was a music teacher and so we always had music in the house because she loved it. She was a teacher of shamisen and odori and gidayu, joruri, and so I picked it up from there when I was a little girl. I think when I was five years old I appeared on stage singing joruri and an opera type thing with my mother - didn't know I was learning that just by listening to her play and teaching her students. I was behind the door listening. I started copying her and she was surprised. So she put me on the stage at a recital.

She must have thought you were good, that you could actually sing.

Well, she never told me I was good but she put me on the stage.

Did your mother study music in Japan?

Yes. We went to Japan in 1999 with all my brothers and sisters to look for Mother and Father's family. We didn't know anything about them. And so someone told us where they're from. So we went to those two places in Japan and found out that she was just a little renegade. She would not go to school she would cut classes and go to the music school and just listen on the side and to try to learn how to play shamisen and to sing and dance. And so they went after her every day after school because she was a truant. They would bring her home and she would sneak away and do it again. They finally gave up and sent her to music school. So when she came over here she was just a youngster, but was ready to teach.

She always told my brother and sister, if you even have a dime save it and go see music. Go see plays, and always stick in the arts like that. She's an Issei, you know? She had that drive for her children, she says you got to keep on with music.

She had a shamisen and we had the piano, beautiful piano. She played all kinds of instruments and she just learned all on her own, she never took lessons. She could play violin, the piano, shakuhachi and the drum and the shamisen. She just knew how to do it. I never saw it, my sister told me a master shamisen instructor came from Japan to test her and he played the tsugaru, a real fast one and she kept up with him. He was surprised and she had no lessons. But she could keep up with him because she had that in her mind that she could do it. So I understand she was quite talented but I didn't even hear it, because this was before my time and I was too busy playing outside, maybe.

MARY'S PARENTS, TOMITARO AND MACHI KAGEYAMA

That's unique. What prefecture was your mother from?

My mother is from Chiba near Tokyo. And my father was from Okayama which was a pottery area, they made the bizenyaki. My mother was always doing something with students, and she loved to go fishing, to go abalone picking, and she was like an all around kind of a person, she did everything. So I guess my sister and I kind of took after her. We would not sit at home and read books, we were always going about and around.

You wanted to be active. So do you remember the day that Pearl Harbor happened?

Yes. I was 16, almost 16 and a half. And we just heard on the radio because we had the Sunday radio on and we were shocked, we were just bewildered. Japan attacking a big country like this. I was just shocked, and the neighbor on one side would shun us and just threw daggers at us and started calling us names right away. But the one across the street, they were Italians and they were the sweetest, nicest, kindest people, and the daughter was my very best friend and the son was my oldest brother's best friend, too. So they were always supportive. And in fact when I got married, I named one of my daughters after her.

So the parents were sympathetic, good people.

Yes, she would bake the Italian breads and bring it over and make pasta, bring it over. They were just really sweet, kind, honest people and they're the only ones that I could remember who were real kind to my brother, who is our guardian at that time. They put his car up on the block for him during the war time when we were incarcerated, kept it for him and ran it for him to keep it going. Just sweet, kind people.

Was your neighborhood diverse?

We were the only Japanese except for behind us there was a ranch, a farmer's ranch, and they were very good to us because we had no parents and so they said just help yourself to what was out in the yard, free, out in the field and take what you want.

And so you saw some of this backlash towards you and your family.

Oh yes, in school especially. One teacher before the evacuation order went out she says, "When are you going? When are you leaving?" She was very crude and I just had to keep my head down and say "I don't know," because I really didn't know, I was quite naive. I had no idea what was happening, what was going to happen to us. My brother took it all in and he would never let us know. He was trying to keep it from us or he just felt so ashamed or sad that this was going to happen to us. He knew nothing about what was going to eventually be our fate. He just knew that we had to leave so we didn't own our home. We had a rental and then we had no money. We were very poor so we couldn't buy suitcases.

So my sister, the eldest, she was already married by then. She got married at 19 years old, and she went out and bought heavy canvas and sewed duffel bags for us and we took all of our belongings in duffel bags. I remember it was a striped canvas. We just took our clothing. There's nothing else we could take. So my mother's instruments - and she even did some barbering on the side - her barbering things were put into the Japanese school, and they stored it for us. Then we found out that a lot of people broke into it or the person who was supposed to be guarding it were letting people come in, so a lot of the things were lost. Some of the things my brother was able to recover but not some of our precious things.

And so your brother, as a surrogate parent at his young age knowing you had to leave, do you remember what he said?

Like I said, I was very naive and I said, "Oh we're going to go someplace? Oh goodie!" You know we were poor – we got to go see movies and go to the ocean, go to the funhouse and all that, that was our "going places." When they said we're going to take a bus and go someplace, I said "yay." I was dumb and 16 years old. My little sister and I went thinking we were going to go to a camp. So when we got there, what a shocker it was, but that's how my brother prepared us, we have to leave everything. He never told us it was done because the government said we had to leave the Pacific coast.

When did you find out that it was a government order?

Along the way there, we said, "Where are we going?" And he says, "We're going to a place where we have to stay where we don't know how long or where it's going to be either." It was a shock to see the vast area of black tar papers. We were all just bewildered. I cried that night because I had no idea what was happening to us. We had no future that we could count on. But I didn't even think ahead, about what's going to happen after we get out of here.

When did you know it was all Japanese Americans?

That was a shocker because being where I was, it was a community of Japanese farmers. We never associated with them because they were different. I mean, they were squares, and we were crazy, you know, we were really nuts and crazy doing things that Japanese parents would frown on. Roller skating and running around in the pasture and gathering mushrooms and things like that. Those kids never did that, they went to Japanese school and they were nice little girls. So that was not good for me not to be able to associate until I went to camp, then I made some wonderful friends and we're still friends to this day. We still get together. We made a club called The Modernaires in camp and they were all my age. It was fun.

So when you got into camp and you started making friends, how did the singing come along?

Before the war they used to have the Nisei Week talent shows. I as a 13 and 14 year old, I went with my brother because he liked to sing and he loved music, and so I tried that and I was asked to sing with a talent show. Two years in a row I sang in that Nisei Week talent show. So by the time I went to camp when I was 16 they knew that I used to sing. One of the first functions I sang at was when they were introducing the Japanese faculty with the Caucasian administration and they asked me to sing, no accompaniment. And I got up and sang and then I sang "Tangerine." At that time it was a song that was popular and then next time they had another get together, I just sang with the piano and the music teacher used to accompany me.

Were you still practicing or taking any kind of lessons?

I took lessons when I was 12 years old until I was 15, 16 almost. The reason I got to take singing lessons at a time when my brother could barely afford to put food on the table is that he bribed me not to go to Japan with my little sister with my stepfather. My mother remarried right after my father died because she had so many children and so right after, I'm sure within a year or so she remarried. And so he had a child with my mother, and he wanted to go back to Japan to start life anew because he didn't want to have this millstone around his neck of having so many kids. So he took his son but he said he'd take my little sister and I, Mary, with him, maybe as a token expression to try to make it easier for my brother to support us. So my brother says, "No, I don't want them to be separated." He said to me, "If you don't go and you stay I'll send you to singing school." Okay, I'm staying! It costs 50 cents for him to send me to singing school. 50 cents. That was a big deal for him to put that money out because he used to put a dollar on the table for my sister to go shopping to buy food for us.

Who started the nickname, "The Songbird"?

I don't know who gave me that nickname, but I think it could have been the music director of the camp, Louie Frizzell. He took me under his wing and he used to go out of camp on the days when he didn't have to teach and bring brand new sheet music for me to learn, the current songs. Things like Judy Garland or Doris Day or whoever was popular and he would bring back new sheet music for me to learn and teach it to me and accompany me in all programs we had at camp. So I always considered him my mentor, he kept me current.

What were some of your favorite songs to sing? Are there any that define that time for you?

The up tempo ones that I really like to sing are "Accentuate the Positive," "Night and Day," and "Old Black Magic."

MARY'S MOTHER (CENTER) WITH HER STUDENTS. MARY'S STEPFATHER IS ALSO IN THE PHOTO.

MARY'S HUSBAND, SHI NOMURA

When you were in Manzanar what was your state of mind? First it was a shock but then you started making friends. At what point did you feel you could get into some kind of groove?

It was early that I could get into it because it was in April when we were put it in camp in school I was in 11th grade. So I had to go to school and I've met so many Japanese, I never knew that there were that many Japanese in the world. So I mean we were best friends right away. And so this time in my life I was beginning to meet people I became lifelong friends with. And I was shy, I didn't know anything about boys. They meant nothing to me and I just had lots of fun with the girls and played softball with them. In the meantime I was still entertaining at the camp programs.

I was asked to sing for the group called The Manzanites, one of the better men's clubs in camp with all the good looking men, all the sports guys were in it. They were having their dance and they asked me to entertain. So in those days they always have an intermission to have somebody tap dance or sing. And so the adviser of that club was Shi Nomura and he says, "Does Mary have an escort?" And in that camp everybody knew who was going around with who, who broke up, who's getting married all that stuff. They said "No her current boyfriend had to leave camp." He says, "Then one of you boys take her." And they said, "Well we all have dates already." He said, "Well then you boys who don't have a date, you ask her. You take her so she doesn't go to a dance by herself that night." So the guys say, "She's too tall for us." I was considered tall in those days. He says, "Well I don't want that girl coming and singing at night without an escort. I'll take her this time but next time you make sure that she has somebody to bring her." His friend came to the office where I was working. He says, "Shi Nomura is going to come pick you up because he doesn't want you to come by yourself." And so he came to pick me up and I think that was in November. It was called a Turkey Trot, it was a camp dance and by New Year's Eve we were spoken for each other.

Was that first time you met each other?

He had seen me entertain pre-war days at that Nisei Week talent show. I said, "You are a fickle man" because he was with his girlfriend sitting next to him, who he was going to get married to — that's another long story. He heard me singing, and I was 14 and he says he was smitten. He says, "I'm going to marry that girl." What an idiot, with his girlfriend next to him! That's what he said he always remembers saying. "I'm going to marry that girl." Then heard me singing in camp. He says, "That sounds familiar."

MARY AND SHI ON THEIR WEDDING DAY

He remembered you by that point?

I said you are a two timing, fast worker.

And everything worked out the way it was supposed to. When you went to the dance with him, what were your feelings toward him at the time?

I really didn't have that romantic feeling towards him but I said, "Oh, he was one of the handsomest guys in camp." Very handsome man. It was nice. He was a gentleman and he was very cordial. We had a nice time and he asked me to a New Year's Eve dance and then I'd never been. Then my sister had a bunch of friends that were dating. My sister was three years younger than I and she says, "I heard that he kissed you." I said, "Yeah."

So that was New Years and he says, "I want to get married and we're going to get married. We're going to tell your brother that we're going to get married. He better agree to it because I'm going to." I left camp in January. He was still in camp. I went to Pasadena.

This is because of your brother's job?

Yes. California was opening up for the Japanese to come back so he got a job and I found a job as a housekeeper. While he [Shi] was in camp I made a recording. He's used to write me love poems, used to write poetry. And I used to set it to music and I took those words and I set it to my own music and took it to a place to get recorded on one of those little records with the big holes in it. I sent it back to him. And so he had that record. And before I left camp, I made a recording with the music teacher on a big 78 disc of I think five songs. So I think that's the only recording of actual music taken in camp of all the ten camps.

Is it true that your husband said because this is where he met you, Manzanar was a happy memory, though "happy" may not be the right word?

That's what he said - that Manzanar was a terrible, terrible experience for everybody and a memory that they won't forget, but I have to keep the other part the memory of my getting married and meeting my future wife there and having children after that and doing all the dedicated work at the [Eastern California] museum. He says, "I can only think of the better part of that. I can't harbor the bad part of that because other people can do it, but I'm not."

There was no barracks or anything there at the camp. He wanted to construct a barrack replica and make it a home for he and I to live in so he could conduct tours for anyone who came to see the camp to see what it was like. He says, "I want to live there and show people." Just not me. I'm not going to live away from my children, and my grandchildren were about to come at that time. I said I'm not going to do that. But we did buy property in Independence so we could retire there. There was a three plot mobile home area of what I guess you call a mobile home. The one facing the mountain was the one he bought and we were going to retire there someday. I said well we can go back and forth but I'm not going to live in the barrack. So we did buy it, but he passed. He was still doing work with the museum [in the town of Independence]. So they still call it the Manzanar Project with Shiro Nomura. He said, "If it wasn't for this, we wouldn't have met at all." He lived in L.A. I lived in Venice. We would not have met. So he always said that was a plus, the only thing he could say, it was a plus. And then after that we just went here and there and had kids in between. Five kids. And when I came out of camp I was a housewife, and the only time I went to work was after my children were all born and we started a fish market. We had a fish market [Shi's Fish Mart] for 22 years. Popular and quite successful.

So people would say "Shish Fish." But then within the last eleven years of his life he developed Alzheimer's and he forgot a lot of things, he forgot how to say things, even the mid part of it he says, "What's your name?" to me. He could not remember. He could not remember how to eat, how to pick up utensils to eat. He completely lost all modes of existing.

SHI'S FISH MART FAMILY WHEN IT OPENED (LEFT) AND WHEN IT CLOSED (RIGHT)

THE KAGEYAMA FAMILY IN THEIR VENICE HOME

When you received the redress money what was your feeling when you got it? Did it mean something to you when you got the apology?

To me, it wasn't enough. It was a token gesture. It was something that was misused. How can you put monetary value on what they did to all of us, you know? I'm not saying we should have gotten more but it just wasn't, it wasn't the right way or the right way to say it for what they did. It just wasn't right. It didn't settle my feeling that that's not enough. Not enough not in a monetary way, but how can you forgive that? So many lives were affected. People, mentally and physically. I felt that it was okay for some people who really needed that money, because even that wasn't enough. And I can't say it should have been three times that amount. Some people just struggled and the majority got all over it. We did alright. It's just the thought of it should not have happened, and what they did for us afterwards thinking this is going to be our token apology.

Did it affect your oldest brother in any way?

I shouldn't say the word blessing, but it was a blessing for my brother. He didn't have to struggle to take care of his three little sisters. He didn't have to go out and look for money, to get money to feed them, and pay for rent and all that. So the government took us and made sure that we had a so-called roof over our head, fed us, and took that responsibility off of him. And so my sisters and I felt that it was a blessing for him. It made it easier for his life and he met his wife in camp also. So from then on it was easier for him. We don't know how it would happen, how would we have survived with welfare or whatever to take care of us? In those days it was, "Oh no, Japanese people don't use things like that." It was pride that allowed him to take care of us but I don't know how he would have kept it up.

I understand that you didn't pursue singing professionally?

I never did. I just sang when I got asked to sing at programs because I always thought when I was a little girl, I'm going to be a singer on the radio. I always thought I would not get in the movies, because who's going to see a Japanese girl performing in the movies? So if they hear me singing on a record, they won't know it's my Japanese face singing. So I always thought, well I'm going to be a singer and make recordings. That's what I thought I was going to do.

I'm sure you just feel happy that you could still sing.

If somebody asks me to sing I say, "Well let me know early enough so I can practice."

MARY AND SHI NOMURA

PAINTING POSTON

Rows of dusty beige barracks sit atop a hill under strings of telephone poles. A young man fishes alone at a serene pond dotted with trees. A boy walks hand in hand along the barracks into shades of blue and twilight with his father, perhaps his grandfather. Gentle watercolors blend seamlessly into each other across the sparse landscape, providing a sense of serenity despite incarceration in the unpredictable Arizona desert. These are the paintings of Harry Yoshizumi.

With promising talent at the surface and a recent high school graduate, Harry (or Haruki) and his family were farmers in their California home of Watsonville when the war's upheaval took them first to Salinas, then far out of state to Poston. His educational aspirations to attend art school were put on hold, a far too common story for countless Japanese American teenagers who were interested in pursuing their passions. But Harry didn't let imprisonment keep him from growing as an artist. While in camp, he built a repertoire of paintings, and his large range of impressionistic watercolors placed him within a young group of artists that were mentored by Disney animator and prolific painter, Gene Sogioka. Along with developing his own style, Harry was part of a four-person team that created a 20 foot mural for Poston's library, covering an entire wall that took six months to complete.

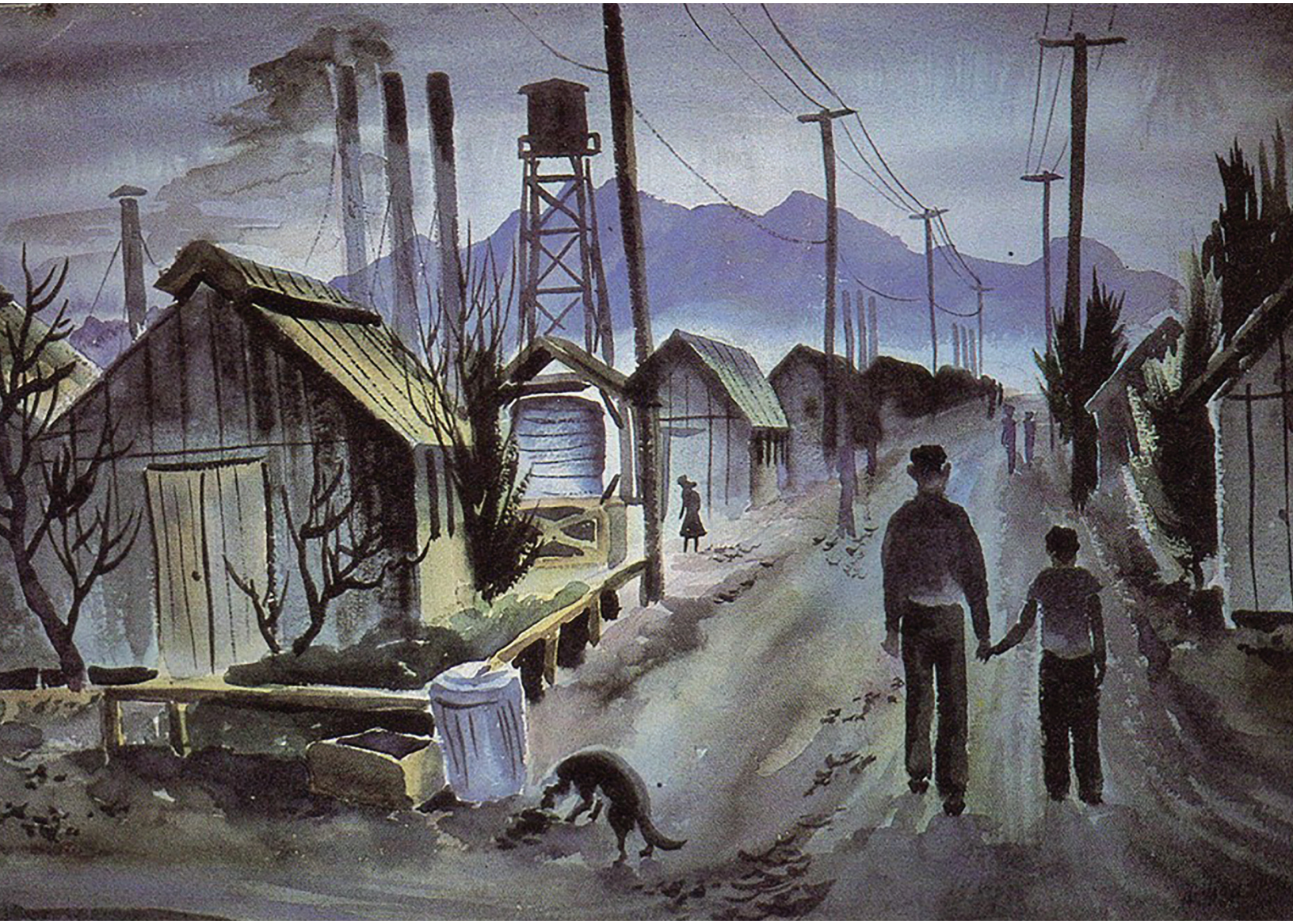
After camp, Harry served in Japan for the U.S. Army as a translator from 1946 to 1948. When he returned home, he attended several art schools around the Bay Area, honing his craft while continuing to farm in Watsonville. But the uncertainty of an artist's life shifted Harry's career path, and he went into the Silicon Valley industry of electronics, working at IBM for over 25 years. Though his love for art never left. Even in his late 60s, Harry continued to paint and built a studio shop for himself in his backyard.

HARRY YOSHIZUMI (FAR LEFT), GUS NAKAGAWA (FAR RIGHT) AND THE PAINTERS OF THE POSTON LIBRARY MURAL

HARRY IN HIS POSTON STUDIO

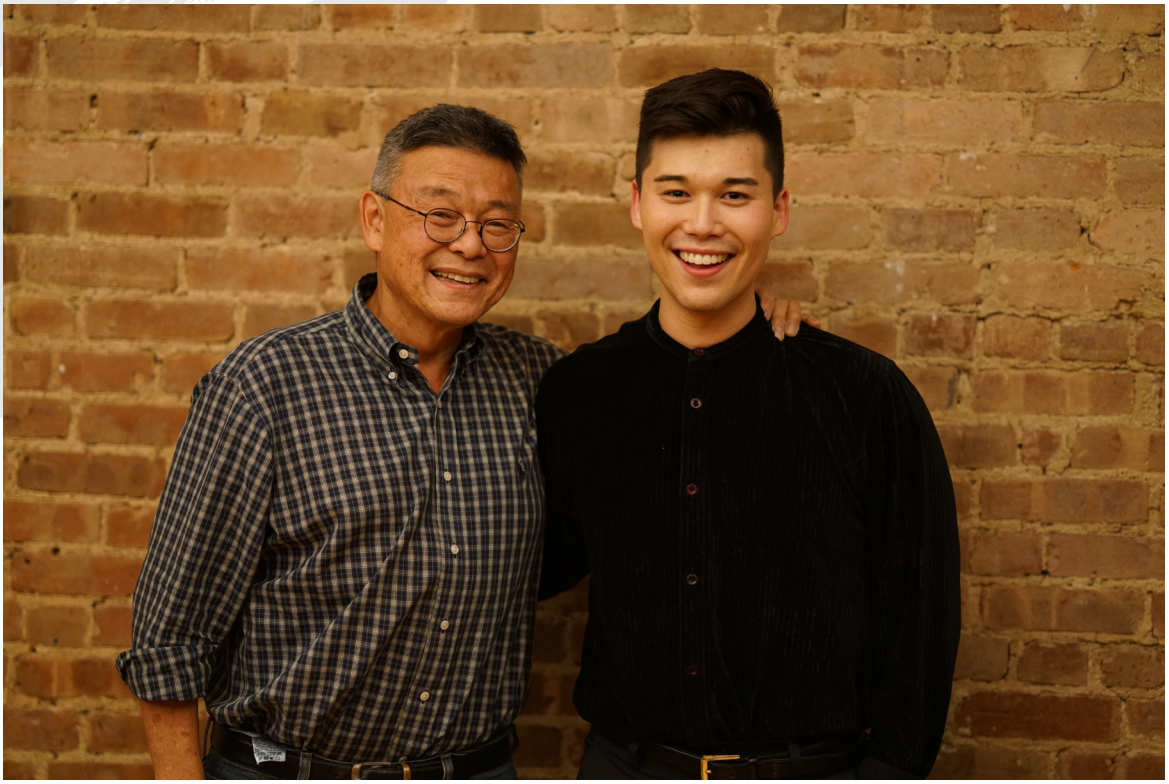
Today Harry is 97 years old, living in San Jose, California, with his birthday celebrated this past April. Because he had no children, his primary caretakers are his nieces, Kathy Matsushita and Pat Day. Though he is sometimes unable to recognize them, Kathy still reflects fondly on the time she spent with him as a young girl. "He lived in our house from 1960 to 1963, so that was when I was around 10 years old. I always remember the smell of linseed oil, oil paints, and turpentine emanating from his room. I always liked his watercolors the best." Most of what the family knows about his time in camp was written down in a steno notebook that Harry took with him to Salinas and Poston. But today if Harry reads his own journal, he remains a man of few words who rarely elaborates on the past. "I don't know if it brings back memories for him or not; he doesn't talk about it," says Kathy. "We never really had any long, extended conversations with him about it." When asked what she hopes he's remembered for, she says it's for his love of arts overall. Harry was something of a renaissance man. In addition to painting, he also played the violin, viola, and clarinet.

Like his memories from that time, there is very little backstory or description to contextualize his Poston collection. But what remains is what we, as viewers, take away from his tranquil interpretations of camp life. As Harry chose to spend his time behind barbed wire doing exactly what he loved, it leaves us to wonder what we would have done to pass the time within his watercolor landscapes.

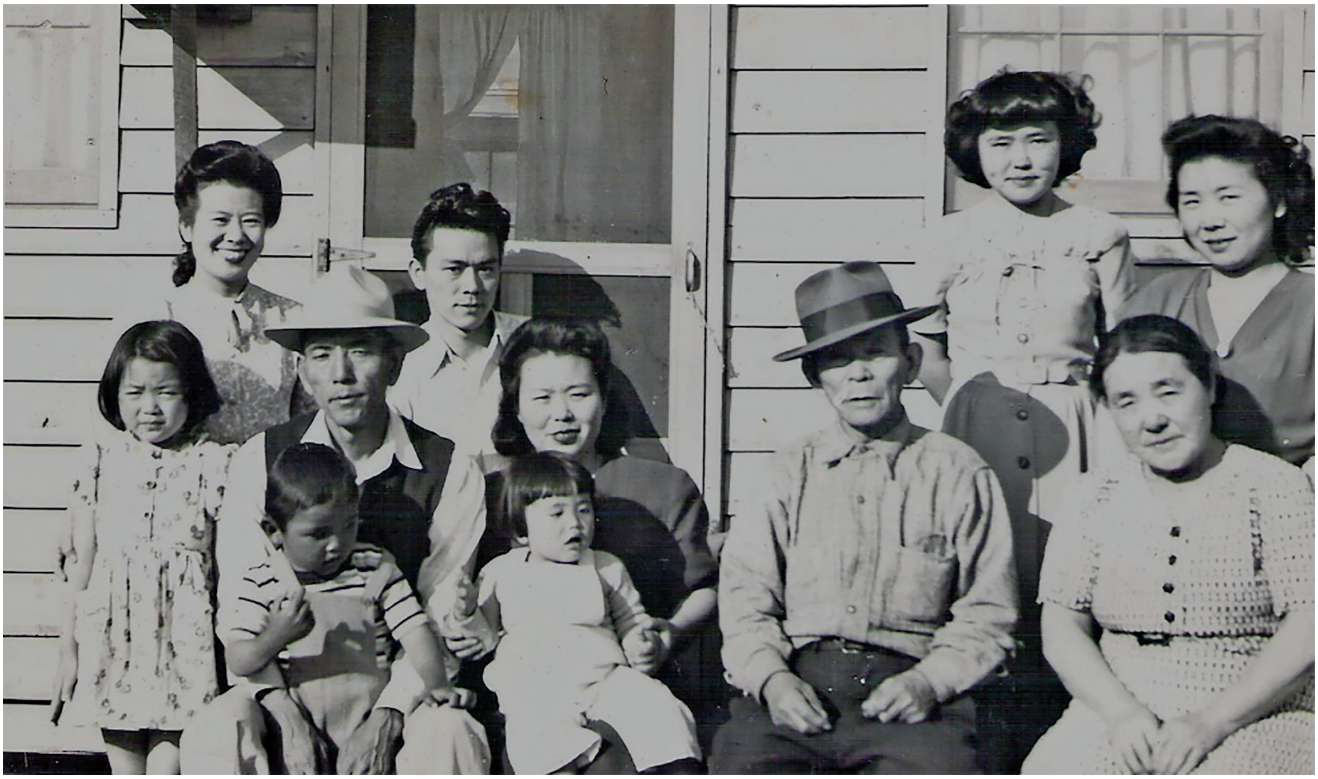


HEALING TRAUMA on the STAGE

Sam Hamashima is fourth generation Japanese American, and an up and coming playwright currently based in New York City. He has just written and directed his first play, "American Spies and Other Homegrown Fables" which premiered in mid-July on a Virginia stage. But the path Sam had to walk down to reach this point was not without its significant family trauma, replete with guarded secrets and avoidance. His family even left Poston to start their lives again in North Carolina, more or less fleeing their past in California, leaving a young Sam with unanswered questions that he grapples with on stage. "American Spies" is set just after Pearl Harbor, with palpable tensions rising between a Japanese American family and white neighbors, while two spiritual guardians - maneki neko and paper crane - try to help the young protagonist, George, sort through identity, love, and the loss of cultural assets, like language. Sam and I spoke on the phone as he prepared to open "American Spies" in Fairfax, Virginia. He walked me through his family history, and the unexpected road that led him to the theater.



SAM AND HIS FATHER, LES HAMASHIMA. PHOTO: SEAN VELASCO DODGE PHOTOGRAPHY



A FAMILY PHOTO TAKEN IN BRIDGETON, NEW JERSEY AROUND 1947 OR 1948 WHEN THE FAMILY WAS WORKING AT SEABROOK FARMS. BACK ROW FROM LEFT: AUNTIE NAN, UNCLE GEORGE, AUNTIE TERRIE, AUNTIE MASANO. MIDDLE ROW FROM LEFT: REIKO, GRANDPA KENZO, AIKO, GEICHAN, BACHAN. FRONT ROW FROM LEFT: MASARU EDMUND NAKAWATASE, HISAKO.

Why one Hamashima son left Japan...

There's definitely holes in my knowledge and so that's something I've started to realize, is how much I don't know, which is exciting. Family history is a funny thing. People grab on to these buoys that will be interesting for the grandchildren to remember. So I was always told, my family can be traced back to when the Jesuits came over, like 1500 or 1600s or so and we converted. And that's a big reason why there's not much of a Buddhist line in my family or Shinto beliefs. So we became translators, and a line of the Imperial translators, and I don't know if that was for English or for Portuguese. But it was something. And so my great-great-grandfather was a samurai as well and so we were really tied to the Emperor and modernization also because we were converting. My great-grandfather came over as a pioneer. I would always laugh when my dad said that and he would say, "No, Sam, really. Japan had these pioneers that would set out. That's literally what it was."

The origins of theater in the Hamashima family...

He was on one of the first boats from Japan and he started farming. He started a tomato farm, he started a kabuki company. It was one of the first kabuki companies there which is ironic because we had no link to theater in my family until we figured that out.

The lead up to his great-grandfather's arrest...

He was identified as a community leader because he was trying to set up a co-op, or a commitment between the Chinese farmers and the Japanese farmers to be able to work together. And he was trying to maintain some relationship between, and that really angered the Caucasian farmers. So when Pearl Harbor happened, he was identified because he had so many ties within the farming community. He was identified because of how many people he talked to.

I was always told that he kind of vanished. And my grandparents were kids. They said, "Yeah he just wasn't there one day. And he didn't come back for a long time." On February 19th, the FBI rounded up a bunch of people and they had the order to do so before 9066 was signed. So it was at the minute this thing was signed, they could be at their door. And my great-grandfather was part of that group, and he was taken away. There's a newspaper reporting of this and it has a list of the people identified.

The origins of family secrets...

This is kind of where the history record goes away. And then I just know he came back. And every family member I talked to said, "He was thinner, he didn't talk much. It was weird." That was kind of where it stopped. And my father didn't learn Japanese so he could never talk to him. So there was a grandson and grandfather but there was never a way for that information to be passed.

So he came back to the assembly center, then my family went to Poston. We were there for the whole time and then [the government] was like, "Great you're free! Go be normal again." They never thought they could go back west. That was never up for discussion, that was not something they would do. They had a really traumatic experience. They remember seeing people going into their houses when they were leaving. On my grandmother's side, she remembers seeing their sofa being carried out. Also, the white people took the farm. And this is me speculating right now, I think the relationships my great-grandfather built there all were lost during internment, like the cooperation and the two Asian American communities working together instead of competing. I think my great-grandfather was kind of on to something even though he wasn't using that verbiage. But I don't think he ever thought that could ever happen anymore.

How they came to settle on the East Coast...

So the only place that would hire us was Seabrook Farms in New Jersey. There's a Seabrook Buddhist temple there. I'm not Buddhist, but that is a very important place to me because that's where I go to the obon festival. So we were up there in Seabrook, packing frozen food, living our American dream life, whatever was left.

And this is when my grandfather and grandmother met, they met at Seabrook. And so they decided to move down to Raleigh, North Carolina and they were chicken sexers. And that's kind of where we ended up. It's in the Beltline, this funny little place. And my dad grew up there with his two sisters, he's the oldest. They're all about two to three years apart from each other and they were the first Japanese family in Raleigh. They were supported on an educational level and my grandparents really pushed them to achieve some "American success."

SAM'S GRANDPARENTS, SHIYOKO AND GEORGE HAMASHIMA

FAMILY PHOTO OF THE SIBLINGS AND THEIR RESPECTIVE PARTNERS. EVERYONE IN THE PHOTO WAS SENT TO CAMP.

Why Sam feels his family 'ran away' from their past...

I think there is such a protection aspect to this. 'What they don't know won't hurt them.' And also, what's useful now? And I can't believe I have to say, shikata ga nai [it can't be helped] again. And I can't speak for everyone, but that idea was huge in my family. It wasn't so much about protection, as more about, 'You're distracting yourself from the American dream. You're distracting yourself from getting to the finish line.' And it was never explicitly stated that way, but looking at the trajectory of my father and his siblings, they were always pushed to go and succeed. It was never about reparations, it was never about the past.

Something that's really fun is my father and I love talking about this stuff together because we have such different experiences with it. And we do talk backs together, like when 'American Spies' was being done at Michigan, he came up and had a talk back with me. And he said, 'I never thought this information was useful. I think about how much of an emotional discovery and release it's giving my son. We got that check, and I still to this day don't know if my father cashed that. Because that wasn't what this was for us.' I contemplate this over and over: are they running away, are they running away to something else? Not knowing was so that I could focus. It was in a way, sort of bleaching me and taking away that color and family history so that it's not something I'm carrying in my backpack.

On "American Spies" and creating his life's work through family secrets...

The play is set within the 24 hours between the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war on Japan. So much of our culture is hard to dramatize because it's all in food, all in book. But I thought, what if I personified that by having these two family members who are the maneki neko [lucky cat] and paper crane? So the son has these two people who just live in the house with them, and so the whole thing is, do they have to kill these two family members? So it's a bit dark. I'm this queer Japanese American guy, I lived for anime growing up so I'm trying to incorporate a lot of that in my style, so it's really fun. And there's this one coming out scene in it.

A lot of us are trying to learn so much about the world and we have to start with ourselves. And there's so much I don't know about my family history that it's really the most passionate thing in my life right now. It's framing the way I think about the trajectory of my life. So when am I going to California to reclaim that, and look at a barrack for the first time? And when am I going to go to Japan? I should know that, but I don't.

I've noticed that a lot of people connect with that search, and connect with the not knowing, and the misinformation of their childhood. Because we don't get to choose our lesson plans at home. There are things we didn't get agency over. What made them say those stories to us? It's really becoming my life's work.

To learn more about Sam's work and "American Spies" visit his website at samhamashima.com

SAM AND HIS GRANDFATHER, GEORGE

DEDICATION

Thank you to the family members who generously granted permission for the works of their parents, grandparents, and uncles to be included in this issue: Kathy Matsushita (on behalf of Harry Yoshizumi); Alyson Iwamoto, Glenn Togawa, June Urban (on behalf of Akira Togawa); David Inada (on behalf of Masao Tom Inada); Brooke Ishibashi (on behalf of Mary Nomura); and Sam Hamashima.

This issue is dedicated in memory of Sandy Kaya, one of my dad's oldest friends and an early supporter of this work, who also loved to play the ukelele. Thank you, Sandy, we love and miss you dearly.

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